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ABSTRACT

A total of 23 American and Hmong-American preschool children from 2 day care center classrooms were observed during free play in an effort to determine the proportion of positive, negative, and neutral initiations made to peers as a function of sex and cultural background. A series of weighted, two-way analyses of variance were performed on positive and negative initiations among the Americans and Hmong-Americans. Results revealed significant main effects for culture on positive and negative initiations to Americans, and significant main effects for culture on positive initiations to Hmong-Americans, males, and females. Significant main effects for sex were found for positive initiations made to Hmong-Americans, Americans, and males. Evidence demonstrating that young children's peer interactions are often segregated on the basis of culture and sex was found. Overall, frequency of initiations was greater within culture and sex than across culture and sex. The failure to find significant effects of culture or sex on negative initiations suggests that the lack of cross-cultural peer interactions is not motivated by hostile intentions. The lack of cross-cultural interactions is discussed in terms of peer familiarity and communication skills. (Author/RH)

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Cross-Cultural Interactions In An American Day Care Setting

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Abstract

Twenty-three American and English-speaking Hmong-American preschoolers were observed during free play in order to determine the proportion of positive, negative and neutral initiations made to peers as a function of sex and cultural background. A series of weighted two-way (culture X sex) analyses of variance were performed on the positive and negative initiations made among the Americans and Hmong-Americans. Results revealed significant main effects for culture on the positive and negative initiations to Americans, and significant main effects for culture on the positive initiations to Hmong-Americans, males and females. Significant main effects for sex were found for positive initiations made to Hmong-Americans, Americans and males. Overall, the frequency of initiations were greater within culture and sex than across culture and sex. The lack of cross-cultural interactions was discussed in terms of peer familiarity and communication skills.

Cross-Cultural Interactions In An American Day Care Setting

Since the early 1970's, increased attention has been focused on understanding the dynamics and determinants of peer interaction. In a major review of peer relations, Hartup (1983) credits such interest to the acknowledgement that peers are a significant force in the socialization process. Not only are children exposed to peers at earlier ages for longer periods of time, but children are also responsive to, and interested in, peers at ages much earlier than was once believed. Howes (1988), for example, found that social interaction among young toddlers (between the ages of 13 and 24 months) was characterized by complementarity as well as reciprocity--the ability to exchange roles and turns within the context of play. In addition, young toddlers were able to form stable and emotionally responsive friendships.

The recognition of the precocity of preschool peer interaction has led to a number of interesting findings that incorporate several factors influencing the ways young children relate to one another. For example, it

is well-known that sex is a significant factor in preschoolers' peer interactions (Hartup, 1983). Numerous researchers have demonstrated not only sex awareness but actual social cleavage in the direction of same-sex preference at the preschool age (e.g., Abel & Sahinkaya, 1962; Charlesworth & Hartup, 1967; Serbin, Tonick, & Sternglanz, 1977). Peers have also been found to exert a significant influence on the preschooler's sex-role development. From the age of three years and upward, peers have been found to reinforce one another for "gender-appropriate" activities. Furthermore, preschoolers were found, at least in the short term, to respond to these peer-administered contingencies by continuing the reinforced gender-appropriate activity for a relatively longer period of time (Lamb & Roopnarine, 1979).

As with gender, preschoolers have been found to demonstrate awareness of race or ethnic differences (Clark & Clark, 1939; Stevenson & Stevenson, 1960). There has also been some evidence that this awareness results in same-race preference when preschoolers are asked to choose hypothetical friends (Abel & Sahinkaya,

1962; Lambert & Taguchi, 1956). However, the effect of racial awareness on either the quantity or quality of preschool peer interaction in a natural setting has not been substantively documented. Whereas Stevenson and Stevenson (1960) noted that racial awareness amongst children attending an interracial nursery school did not necessarily preclude cross-race interaction, McCandless and Hoyt (1961) did find greater frequencies of same-race as opposed to cross-race interactions. In the latter study, Caucasian and Oriental preschoolers were observed during their free play to determine the influence of culture and sex on the choice of a companion. The authors noted that statistically signficant same-culture choices for both Caucasians and Orientals seemed to reflect comfort with one's own cultural group rather than "hostile" discrimination. Such cleavage by race or cultural background appears to continue throughout childhood and adolescence. For example, Schofield and Sagar (1977) and Francis and Schofield (1980) found that students attending an integrated junior high school tended to interact more with individuals of their own race within the classroom

as well as in the lunchroom. Additionally, same-sex preferences were also paramount, as has been found at the preschool level.

The present study intended to corroborate the above findings by capitalizing on the naturally occurring opportunities for cross-cultural interaction in a day care facility that enrolled American and Hmong-American preschoolers. The Hmongs are a Laotian tribal people who fought for the United States government in the 1960's and emigrated to the United States after the Communists took power in Vietnam in the 1970's. The customs, language and family structure of the Hmongs are vastly different from mainstream American life and have led to numerous problems of acculturation, particularly among Hmong elders (Hayes and Kalish, 1987). As is typical of refugee families, it appears that the Hmong children are more easily adapting to the lifestyle of the United States, although empirical evidence is scant (Sherman, 1988).

In our study, American and Hmong-American preschoolers were observed during their free play sessions at a day care center. We were particularly

interested in determining whether or not the initiation to interact would exhibit the cultural and sex cleavage that previous literature suggests. In Francis and Schofield's (1980) work, the quality of interactions were assessed in terms of their positive, negative, or neutral tone. It was felt that an analysis of the quality of initiations would provide useful additional information in our examination of the frequency of bicultural interactions among preschool children.

Method

Subjects

A total of twenty-three children (eleven Hmong-Americans, twelve Americans) from two day care center classrooms were studied. The three- and four-year-old American children were divided equally by age and sex; of the Hmong-American children who were studied, the six boys were equally divided between three- and four-years of age, and of the five girls observed, two were three-years-old. The American subjects for this study were randomly chosen. Most of the Hmong-American children were born either in Laos or refugee camps in Southeast Asia. A random selection of the Hmong-

American children who were conversant in English were also selected for observation. Competency in conversational English was determined by teacher evaluation, observations of verbal interactions among the target children, and a formal question and answer session within the context of the classroom teacher reading a story to the group of children.

Procedure

Initiation behavior was observed in the two classes during morning and afternoon free play times for a period of approximately four weeks during the late fall. The free play sessions occurred in open areas within each classroom. Children were allowed to move from one area to another as they desired, and movement between areas was frequent for all children. Data was collected by two undergraduate observers who sat in a sections of the classrooms which simultaneously offered a good view of the subjects and discouraged interaction with the children. The positions varied from session to session. In order to obtain an interrater reliability of the coding system, the two observers simultaneously observed and coded a

total of twenty target children for twenty five-minute coding sessions.

Twenty-one of the subjects were observed for ten, five-minute intervals. The remaining two subjects (a three-year-old and a four-year-old, who were Hmong-American males) were observed for seven and eight sessions, respectively, because of absences toward the completion of the observation sessions. The order of observation of each target child was randomly determined. During each coding interval, the frequency of positive, negative, and neutral initiations were recorded, as well as the culture and sex of the child initiated to.

The definitions of affective tone of the initiations were similar to those used in Francis and Schofield's (1980) study of peer interaction in an integrated junior high school. Positive initiations included friendly smiles, non-aggressive bodily contact, cooperative interaction, giving assistance, verbal behavior with positive content or accompanied by smiles and laughter, and non-negative behavior accompanied by facial or verbal expressions of friendly

intent. Negative initiations were defined as those that involved bothering or teasing, hitting, pinching, hair pulling, physical threats, grabbing, name-calling or other unfriendly verbalizations, and negative facial expressions. Neutral initiations included mock fights, lightly tapping a person to get his or her attention, and verbalizations with neutral or unknown content.

Results

Interobserver reliability checks were obtained in both of the classrooms for target children of both sexes and races. The mean reliability for the coding of initiations was .90, as determined by dividing the frequency of agreements by the total number of observations.

In order to control for the unequal number of responses per subject, the positive and negative initiations for each subject were weighted by their respective total number of positive and negative initiations. The percentages of neutral initiations were not analyzed because these types of initiations rarely occurred for Americans or Hmong-Americans. Table 1 presents the mean percentages of positive and

negative initiations made by Hmong-American males and females and American males and females on the basis of culture. The percentages were analyzed by a series of

Insert Table 1 about here

weighted (controlling for the unequal number of responses per subject) two-way (culture X sex) ANOVAs. The first analysis examined the percentage of positive initiations made to Americans by American males and females and by Hmong-American males and females. A significant main effect for culture was found, $F(1, 22) = 23.99$, $p < .0001$, with Americans positively initiating to Americans more than to Hmong-Americans (see Table 1). A significant main effect for sex was also found, $F(1, 22) = 4.50$, $p < .05$, with males positively initiating to Americans more frequently than females (see Table 1).

The results of the weighted ANOVA examining the effects of culture and sex on the percentages of negative initiations to Americans yielded a significant main effect for culture, $F(1, 17) = 17.65$, $p < .001$.

Americans made more negative initiations to Americans than did Hmong-Americans (see Table 1). For the weighted analysis of the percentages of positive initiations made to Hmong-Americans, significant main effects were found for culture, $F(1, 22) = 23.27$, $p < .0001$, and for sex, $F(1, 22) = 7.48$, $p < .01$. Inspection of the mean percentages (see Table 1) reveals Hmong-Americans had more positive initiations to Hmong-Americans than to Americans, and that males positively initiated more to Hmong-Americans than did females. A significant culture by sex interaction, $F(1, 22) = 9.20$, $p < .007$, revealed that positive initiations to Hmong-Americans were especially prevalent for Hmong-American males. In view of these findings, it is notable that the weighted ANOVA using the percentage of negative initiations to Hmong-Americans yielded no significant main effects or interactions.

Table 2 presents the mean percentages of positive and negative initiations made to the preschoolers on the basis of sex by Hmong-American males and females, and American males and females. A series of weighted,

Insert Table 2 about here

two-way (culture X sex) ANOVAs was conducted on the percentages of positive and negative initiations made to males and females. The results of the weighted ANOVA which used the percentage of positive initiations made to males as the dependent variable revealed significant main effects for culture, $F(1, 22) = 20.68$, $p < .0002$, and sex, $F(1, 22) = 8.16$, $p < .01$. Hmong-Americans made a significantly greater number of positive initiations to males, and males, overall, made a significantly greater number of positive initiations to males (see Table 2). In addition, a significant culture by sex interaction was found, $F(1, 22) = 9.62$, $p < .006$. Hmong-American males made the largest percentage of positive initiations to males. The weighted ANOVA examining the percentages of negative initiations made to males revealed no significant main effects or interaction for culture or sex.

The final two weighted ANOVAs looked at the percentages of initiations made to females. The

weighted ANOVA examining the percentages of positive initiations made to females yielded a significant main effect for culture, $F(1, 22) = 4.64$, $p < .04$; Americans made more positive initiations to females than did Hmong-Americans (see Table 2). The weighted ANOVA examining the percentages of negative initiations made to females revealed no significant main effects or interaction for culture or sex.

In summary, the results of the data analyses support previous findings suggesting both cultural and sex cleavage among preschool children. Thus, American children tend to initiate interactions more often to other American children, and Hmong-Americans tend to initiate more frequently to other Hmong-Americans, within the same classroom. Furthermore, boys tend to initiate more often to other boys, and girls to other girls. In addition, it is important to note that the affective tone of these initiations are, for the most part, positive.

Discussion

Using a relatively unique day care situation in which American preschoolers and children of Laotian

refugees are placed within the same classrooms, this study yielded further evidence that young children's peer interactions often are segregated on the basis of culture and sex. The failure to find significant effects of culture and/or sex on negative initiations suggests that the lack of cross-cultural peer interactions are not motivated by hostile intents, an observation also noted by McCandless and Hoyt (1961). In fact, we found that Americans made more negative initiations to other American children than to Hmong-American children. This finding may reflect the greater aggressiveness of American children toward each other, or it may be due to the quality of the specific peer interactions that took place between these American children (Masters & Furman, 1981).

The main findings of this study corroborate earlier research that suggests a same-race or same-ethnic group bias in preschool peer preferences and interactions (Hartup, 1983). The question of why such young children, who share some commonality of experiences within a day care context, seek most often to play with others of the same cultural background is

significant. It is becoming increasingly apparent that peer familiarity is an important factor in the formation of preschool friendships. The presence of a familiar peer fosters more cognitively mature play (Doyle, Connolly, & Rivest, 1980) and facilitates the development of social competence (Howes, 1988). Such extensive interaction with a peer may not only come from attendance in a day care center, but also from contact outside of the center. In the present study, the Hmong-American children did not come from the same family, nor, as far as we were able to determine, were they seeing each other when they were not at the day care center. Thus, peer familiarity in terms of frequency of contact, in all likelihood, was similar for the American and Hmong-American children.

Familiarity may not only be defined in terms of the frequency of interaction over an extended period of time, but also in terms of similarity of attributes such as culture or sex. In the present study, the Americans and Hmong-Americans were dissimilar in several ways that may have contributed to fewer intercultural interactions. Not only did the two

groups differ in physical appearance, but in socioeconomic status. Whereas the majority of the American children were from middle-class backgrounds, the economic level of the homes of the Hmong-American children was considerably lower. It is possible that each cultural group interacted most often with one another because of the commonalities in appearance and possessions. Collins and Gunnar (1990) suggest that cultural assumptions about children and their development may affect behavior. Similar play styles within each cultural group may in part stem from familial expectations about appropriate ways for preschoolers to interact with their peers.

Discourse skills may be another factor contributing to the greater frequency of intracultural preferences among the preschool children. In a recent study, Hazen and Black (1989) found that mature communication skills, involving the ability to present clear initiations and respond contingently to the initiations of others, was characteristic of well-liked preschool children. In the present study, care was taken to observe only those Hmong-Americans who were

able to converse in English. However, what was not ascertained was whether or not these children were also effective communicators in the English language. We observed that many of the interactions among the Hmong-American children were in their native language. Thus, the American and Hmong-American children may have preferred to initiate interactions with children of their own culture simply because it may have been easier and more linguistically comfortable to do so. For the American children, such exchanges in English had a greater likelihood of being responded to with a "turnabout," from another American child. According to Hazen and Black (1989), a turnabout is a relevant and contingent response to an initiation made by another child. The respondee then follows up with a new initiation that solicits a response from another child. Such turnabouts may also be true of Hmong-American intracultural interactions that are in their native tongue.

The finding that most of the initiations were to children of the same sex is hardly surprising. Many studies of preschool peer interaction have found such

sex cleavage (e.g., Hinde, Titmus, Easton, & Tamplin, 1985; Masters & Furman, 1981) and Hartup (1983) suggests that such early sex cleavage is a combined result of adult encouragement, compatibility in same-sex styles of play, and early development of gender role schemas. An interesting finding in the present study was that the Hmong-American males were particularly gregarious in their initiations to other males. Correspondingly, a greater frequency of positive initiations to females by Americans was also observed. Whether this is idiosyncratic of the particular children under observation, or related to the patriarchal family system of the Hmong culture, is unknown.

From the standpoint of promoting intercultural relations, it would seem desireable to promote interaction among children from different backgrounds, beginning at as early an age as possible. Howes (1988) found that friendships in very young children require many months of contact. It is therefore plausible that preschoolers who have the opportunity to be exposed to children of different racial and cultural backgrounds

for an extended period of time may eventually become comfortable with one another and manifest a greater frequency of cross-cultural or cross-race interactions. For the Hmong-American children, increased interaction with American children may enhance adaptation to the United States as well as improve language skills. For American children, such interactions are not only important for fostering their social competence (Howes, 1988), but also for creating an early template for later understanding and appreciation of people who come from distinctly different cultural backgrounds.

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Table 1

Mean Percentages[1] of Positive and Negative Initiations on the Basis of Culture

	To Americans		To Hmong-Americans	
	+	-	+	-
Initiators				
Hmong-Americans				
Male	5.36	1.95	19.67	3.23
Female	1.76	0.54	6.88	2.11
Americans				
Male	19.79	3.93	3.21	2.06
Female	14.11	3.06	3.78	2.00

[1]Obtained by dividing the number of positive or negative initiations by the total number of positive or negative (respectively) number of initiations for each subject.

Table 2

Mean Percentages[2] of Positive and Negative Initiations on the Basis of Sex

	To Males		To Females	
	+	-	+	-
Initiators				
Hmong-Americans				
Male	19.67	3.41	3.85	0.33
Female	6.44	2.11	3.68	0.83
Americans				
Male	3.74	2.43	9.72	1.00
Female	4.15	2.31	9.45	0.63

[2]Obtained by dividing the number of positive or negative initiations by the total number of positive or negative (respectively) number of initiations for each subject.